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Devolution and User Participation in Public Services: How They Work and What They Do

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Summary. Devolution and user participation have had enduring popularity as initiatives in public services in many countries. The 1997 Labour government renewed interest in the UK. However, how devolution and participation work and what they do, particularly in combination, are still not well understood. Research has been handicapped by key conceptual problems over definition, measurement and the identification of effects, and challenged by gaps between rhetoric and reality. Data on combined devolution and user participation through Tenant Management Organisations in English council housing were used to specify the extent of changes, examine processes and identify the effects. Formal measures alone were insufficient. Other measures and changes in management processes showed that the combination had the potential for significant, but widely varying effects on service performance.

1. The Enduring Popularity and Topicality of Devolution and Participation

Support for measures to devolve power and decision-making and to increase public participation in social policy and administration first came to prominence 30 years ago (Skeffington, 1969; Arnstein, 1969; Pateman, 1970). Over the past 15 years, there has been an "explosion of enthusiasm" for participation (Beresford and Croft, 1993, p. 2), and a burst of practice and research in decentralisation in the UK (Power, 1984; Gregory, 1985; Barber, 1986; Hoggett and Hambleton, 1987; Willmott, 1987; Mainwaring, 1988; Williams and Burns, 1989).

The current Labour government renewed encouragement of both initiatives, with devolution of power from central government to national and regional bodies (DETR, 1998a), encouragement of 'neighbourhood management' approaches by local government and other bodies (SEU, 2000) and renewed emphasis on public participation in strategies to 'modernise' local government (DETR, 1999a), to improve public services (DETR, 1999b) and to address the prioritised issue of social exclusion (SEU, 1998).

This article explores the key conceptual and empirical problems raised by devolution and participation, with a particular focus on their implementation in combination, using material on council housing in England. Since the late 1970s, council housing has been a particularly problematised area of UK social policy (Burbidge *et al.*, 1981; Audit Commission, 1986; Thatcher, 1993; Cole and Furbey, 1994), for which managerial solutions have been heavily promoted and which

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has a readily identifiable user-group. Partly because of these factors, it has some of longest experience of devolution and participation initiatives in UK social policy. Decentralisation of housing management staff and offices has been advocated as a means of improving poor performance (City University Housing Research Group, 1981; Power, 1984; Audit Commission, 1986; SEU, 2000), and by the 1980s, "virtually all studies of housing policy and practice advocated [tenant participation]" (Birchall, 1992, p. 173). Central government pressed local authorities to implement both devolution and participation through good practice advice and to some extent through criteria for awarding capital funding and through compulsory competitive tendering for housing management.

2. Enduring Conceptual and Empirical Questions

Despite their shared long history of advocacy and practice, devolution and participation also share three major conceptual and empirical problems

(1) What are devolution and participation?
(2) How can devolution and participation be measured, in order to distinguish between rhetoric or formal provisions and reality?
(3) What are the effects of devolution and participation, both separately and in combination?

2.1 What Are 'Devolution' and 'Participation'?

Explicit definitions of the terms are surprisingly hard to come by. Steifel and Wolfe noted that sponsors of participation initiatives "seemed to be reluctant to seek precise definition of the term" (Steifel and Wolfe, 1994, p. 4).

Participation. One of the key characteristics of public participation is its ostensibly consensual position. However, concepts of participation are heavily contested in both theory and practice. Defining 'participation' is difficult, controversial and "problematic" (Mayo and Craig, 1995, p. 6). Participation is a "slippery" term (O'Riordan, 1977, p. 159), characterised by its "elasticity" (Hague, 1990, p. 253). As it has been used more and more and by wider ranges of supporters, its meaning has become more diffuse and "confusion and vagueness seemed to predominate" (Steifel and Wolfe, 1994, p. 4). Definitions of participation range widely. For example, the United Nations Development Programme required participants to have "constant access to decision-making and power" (1993, p. 21), while the Institute of Housing had a broader definition, requiring only that participants' views be requested, "in order to consider them before a decision is made" (IoH/TPAS, 1989, p. 64).

Some writers use the terms 'consultation', 'involvement', 'participation' and 'control' interchangeably. Others feel that there are sharp differences between them (for example, Arnstein, 1969; Campbell, 1985; Adams and Ingham, 1998). Some of these feel that consultation and involvement are not 'real' participation. Some privilege 'control', either exclusive or dominant power, above all other terms as the only one indicating 'real' participation. Some feel that 'participation' is distinct from 'control', the former implying partnership rather than exclusivity or domination.

Key issues at debate are the breadth of the activity in which participation is occurring, from decision-making and implementation to decision-making on broad or narrow agendas, the relative power of participants, whether participation is inherently conflictual (Bogdanor, 1991, p. 461) or can be co-operative, and the relationship between the active participants and the whole population of service users.

Devolution. The definition of devolution is also problematic. Key issues at debate are what is being devolved: power, responsibility, legitimacy, resources; and between what these are passing: differently located, sized or organised units.

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Table 1. Potential combinations of devolution and participation

Devolution and participation	Devolution only
Participation only	*Status quo*

'Decentralisation' and 'devolution' have been used interchangeably and distinctively. Some authors argue that decentralisation may involve changes in physical location only—for example, by the relocation of existing administrative functions—while devolution only occurs when decision-making or budgetary power is transferred. Others refer to power shifts within a single organisation as decentralisation, while devolution requires power shifts to autonomous or semi-autonomous organisations. In this study, the first distinction is used.

The relationship between devolution and participation. Table 1 sets out the possible combinations of devolution and participation. Some writers have suggested that concepts of devolution and participation overlap to such an extent that only the top left and bottom right quadrants can be filled. However, the relations between devolution and participation have not been addressed directly, and it is not clear whether devolution necessitates, enables or requires participation, or *vice versa,* or whether they can exist and operate independently.

2.2 How Much Devolution and Participation Is There?

Rhetoric versus reality. Many authors attempt to distinguish 'real' devolution and participation from 'unreal' forms (for example, Arnstein, 1969) and those involved in practice emphasise the potential for differences between rhetoric, "lipservice" and formal arrangements for devolution and participation, and reality (Bines *et al*., 1993, p. 78). The relative shortage of clear and implementable definitions of the terms could suggest a desire to fudge important issues, or to avoid criteria that could become maxima.

Measuring devolution and participation. Concepts of the 'level' of devolution and participation and methods for measuring them are needed to identify and assess their effects. Without them, a finding of little or no effects, which might be related to the low levels of participation, could be falsely attributed to limitations of participation, and differences in effects between different cases could not be understood. Measures must not rely on rhetorical expressions of support or formal structures, as these may not relate to objective realities, and devolution and participation must be defined independently of and prior to effects in order to avoid circularity.

Existing measures of the 'level' of devolution have tended to measure physical decentralisation—through, for example, the development of local offices to provide and administer services—rather than the devolution of decision-making. Those for participation have tended to count procedures and institutions intended to enable participation, such as the number of tenants' associations or council-tenant forums or the means used by councils to inform tenants, rather than participation itself (for example, IoH/TPAS, 1994; CHR, 1989; Bines *et al*., 1993; DoE, 1995; Cole *et al*. 2000). Other available measures include unidimensional models (Arnstein, 1969), multidimensional adaptations of these (for example, Hood *et al*., 1996) and typologies of forms of devolution and participation (for example, Richardson, 1977).

Debates over whether there are differences between 'consultation', 'involvement', 'participation' and 'control' (for example, Arnstein, 1969; Campbell, 1985; Adams and Ingham, 1998) and between 'decentralisation' and 'devolution' can be seen as partly a proxy for the consideration of power. Contemporary developments in local government and community activity are less likely to be analysed in terms of power relations than were those of the 1960s and 1970s (for example, Cockburn, 1977; Castells, 1977; Dunleavy, 1981), but the related term 'empowerment' has been referred to increasingly widely in participation literature from the

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1990s (for example, Stewart and Taylor, 1995; Somerville, 1998). However, while power is conceptually attractive, it has famously been seen as essentially contested and essentially unmeasurable (Lukes, 1974).

This study draws on procedural measures as used in the literature. In considering original data, the formal level of devolution is assumed to have two dimensions: the extent of power and resources of the 'devolvee' and its size, relative to the devolving organisation. The formal level of participation is measured by the representation of service users on the decision-making body. Qualitative data are used to investigate how the formal devolution and participation work in practice.

Empirical evidence on the level of devolution and participation. Most existing research measures the level of devolution and participation through the establishment of formal organisations and procedures.

The Centre for Housing Research's nationwide study of council housing management showed that, despite widespread interest and advocacy in the late 1980s, even physical decentralisation of staff and administrative functions was exceptional. Only 24 per cent of responding housing authorities had area offices and the average number of homes managed by these offices was 4196 (CHR, 1989, p. 16.). There appears to have been more physical decentralisation of staff and functions than devolution of resources and policy-making (for example, CHR, 1989; Bines *et al*., 1993; Taylor and Douglas, 1998; Taylor, 2000).

While in 1990/91 32 per cent of local authorities had formal joint council–tenant committees of some kind, they would not necessarily have had a tenant majority and most had only an advisory capacity (Bines *et al*., 1993). Sixteen per cent of authorities offered tenants places on a decision-making housing committee or sub-committee, but tenants would have been in a small minority and would have no voting and, in some cases, no speaking rights (Bines *et al*., 1993).

The relationship between devolution and participation. In practice, there has been considerable overlap between central government and local authority initiatives to encourage devolution and participation. They are often referred to in one breath by advocates (for example, Hoggett and Hambleton, 1987; SEU, 2000). A nation-wide survey of local authorities showed a correlation between decentralised management and higher levels of tenant participation (Bines *et al.*, 1993). Many individual initiatives have involved both devolution and participation—for example, through development of estate-based housing management offices alongside new tenants' associations (for example, Power, 1984; DoE, 1995), for maximum management units at 5000 homes alongside requirements for the consultation of tenants through compulsory competitive tendering for housing management services. Writers have suggested that 'real' participation requires devolution and that devolution enables or encourages participation (for example, Birchall, 1992) and/or *vice versa*. Early advocates of tenant management organisations (TMOs) assumed that high levels of participation in housing management depended on high levels of decentralisation, with management units covering small numbers of homes (for example, Power, 1988; Bell *et al*., 1991).

2.3 What Do Devolution and Participation Do?

Outcomes. Outcomes claimed for devolution and participation by advocates include increased efficiency and increased potential for market, quasi-market or customer influence, leading to more effective or responsive services.

Empirical evidence. Most of the claims on devolution have been supported by at least some research findings. For example, in the 1980s and early 1990s, a nation-wide survey of social housing management research showed that the establishment of decentralised offices, with varying levels of decision-making responsibility, was associated

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with more effective services and similar costs to those of centralised management (CHR, 1989). Smaller surveys in council housing have found increased tenant satisfaction and tenant perception of increased management responsiveness and accessibility (Lowndes and Stoker, 1992). Decentralisation across local government services was identified as a necessary condition for more responsive service delivery (Hoggett and Hambleton, 1987; Gaster, 1990) and intensive decentralised management appeared to be particularly effective in making improvements in management performance and resident satisfaction (Glennerster and Turner, 1993). Decentralisation of staff and devolution of some decision-making appeared to maintain and in some cases to add to early improvements in housing management performance and estate popularity over a 15-year period, despite increased concentrations of deprivation (Power and Tunstall, 1995). However, this research did not always specify the levels of devolution implemented clearly or comparably, did not always explain how devolution worked and might have achieved these effects, did not always have satisfactory controls and needs some updating.

There is very little strong evidence for the effects of participation, apparently for the additional reasons that some advocates feel that participation is a good independent of its effects or that its good effects are obvious. For example, Cairncross *et al.*'s influential report advocating council and housing association tenant participation had little evidence of effects (IoH/TPAS, 1994) and, while Taylor argued tenants should be brought "to the centre of regeneration" (Taylor, 1995, pp. 13–14), she spent fewer than 500 words discussing what participation might achieve. Participation has been described as a 'motherhood and apple pie' concept (Beresford and Croft, 1993; O'Riordan, 1977) and an "internationally-accepted desideratum" (Steifel and Wolfe, 1994, p. 4), which virtually all support and few oppose, at least openly.

Many of the initiatives above included some element of combination of devolution and participation, but research did not address this directly. Price Waterhouse's research on devolution and participation through tenant management organisations pointed to effects on housing management and other factors in proportion to the extent of formal devolution and participation but, while much quoted, was flawed by the choice of cases and indicators (Price Waterhouse, 1995).

The value of investigating processes. Given the difficulty in identifying and distinguishing devolution, participation and particular levels of them, and in identifying their effects, greater examination of the processes through which they operate and might achieve effects would be useful, in order to limit the identification of artefactual results. Table 2 shows processes, identified by researchers, through which devolution and participation in housing management might achieve effects. Notably, it was difficult to find studies which investigated either devolution or participation separately. The degree of overlap between the processes identified for devolution and participation is intriguing and these processes suggest fruitful areas for further investigation.

3. A Case Study of Devolution and Participation in Public Services: Tenant Management Organisations

The next sections use data collected during 1996–99 on tenant management organisations (TMOs) in English council housing, to explore further key conceptual and empirical questions on devolution and participation. They address the definition and measurement of devolution and participation and examine changes in process, in order to identify their outcomes.

Local authorities have been able to devolve housing management decision-making and budgets to TMOs since 1975 (McCafferty and Riley, 1989, p. 3). TMOs are legally constituted organisations, intended to institute a high level of devolution

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Table 2. Processes through which devolution and participation in council housing management might influence outcomes, derived from the literature

Potential sources of increased effectiveness
Devolution
More/better information for staff leading to better/less-wasteful decision-making
More contact between staff and users leading to better information
Change in policy and practice leading to more interventionist management/broader approaches to management
More expensive management
Better decisions/improved information/better monitoring leading to more cost-effective management
Participation
More/better/unique/free information for staff leading to better/more legitimate/less wasteful/more responsive/slower decision-making
More contact between staff and users leading to better information and better relations
More legitimacy/change in policy and practice leading to more interventionist management/broader approaches to management
More expensive management
More cost-effective management through better decisions/volunteer labour input/greater pressure on staff/lower demand for services

Source: Campbell (1985); Mainwaring (1987); Power (1988); Clapham *et al*. (1991); Birchall (1992); Steifel and Wolfe (1994); Steele *et al*. (1995); Power and Tunstall (1995); Cairncross *et al*. (1997).

and resident participation in housing management. After a training and development process lasting about two years, and a ballot of all tenants, a board with at least a majority of elected resident representatives takes on responsibility for directing and monitoring day-to-day management. The local authority retains ownership of the housing and some powers, according to legislation and to a formally negotiated and legally binding agreement between it and the board. Until 1987, there was only one form of TMO, the tenant management co-operative (TMC) which had all-resident boards and employed its own staff. By 1991, a second form, the estate management board (EMB), was developed. EMBs had resident-majority boards and used staff seconded from the local authority.

TMOs were chosen because they appear to provide a useful example of the implementation of devolution and participation in combination, while minimising the problems of definition and measurement, because of the formal transfer of powers to a legally constituted body with at least a majority of service users. They were relatively determinate and discrete as units of analysis, in contrast to many other ill-defined and intangible devolution and participation initiatives. They appeared to be an extreme case in social housing and public policy more widely, clearly fitting into the top-left quadrant in Table 1, and have been used, for example, as a procedural measure of a high level of tenant participation (DoE, 1995). This suggested that they could be used to set limits to what devolution and participation could do in other areas.

The research involved an original enumeration of TMOs, using previously unpublished data from a database held by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) supplemented by a review of 'grey' literature and snowballing methods. A stratified sample of 16 TMOs was selected to represent the distribution in the whole population of size, age, form, location and

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Table 3. Characteristics of stratified sample of TMOs

Case	Number of homes managed	Date started operation	Form	Region
1	50–99	1975–79	TMC	London
2	50–99	1980–84	TMC	London
3	50–99	1985–89	TMC	London
4	100–249	1995–98	EMB	Other
5	1000 +	1995–98	TMC	London
6	50–99	1980–84	TMC	London
7	500–999	1990–94	TMC	London
8	500–999	1995–98[a]	EMB	London
9	250–499	1995–98[b]	EMB	Other
10	1000 +	1995–98[b]	EMB	North West
11	1000 +	1995–98[b]	EMB	London
12	100–249	1990–94	EMB	London
13	250–499	1990–94	EMB	London
14	500–999	1995–98[b]	EMB	North West
15	1000 +	1990–94	EMB	North West
16	1000 +	1990–94	EMB	North West

[a] Established under the 'Right to Manage'.
[b] Agreement signed before the 'Right to Manage' began, although operation did not start until 1995–98.
Sources: Enumeration of TMOs.

whether the TMO was the only one in its local authority (see Table 3). Most had been operating for several years at the time of the research, as the median start date was 1991. In each case, interviews were carried out with resident board members, TMO staff, senior local authority officers and councillors, totalling 83 individuals. Names and exact details are not given in order to preserve the anonymity of the cases and interviewees.

The enumeration showed that, by the beginning of 1998, there were at least 169 TMOs managing local authority housing in England. The 129 TMOs for which full information was obtained were managing 54 107 homes. Extrapolating from their mean size produced an estimated total of 68 297 council homes managed by TMOs in England, or about 2 per cent of the total council stock (DETR, 1998b). TMOs were found in all English regions except the South East outside London, and in 50 different local authorities.

The following discussion draws on both the enumeration and the 16 sampled cases.

4. How Much Devolution and Participation Is There in TMOs? Formal Characteristics

4.1 Formal Levels of Devolution

This section assesses the nature and extent of devolution through TMOs in comparison with the local authority *status quo*, by considering the number of homes they managed and the powers they took on.

Between 1975 and 1987, local authority TMCs tended to be established in very small estates or individual blocks, as government and other advocates assumed that they would only work or would be more successful on this scale (Bell *et al.*, 1991, p. 7). For example, the Greater London Council developed four separate co-operatives in one estate (Power, 1988). Until 1990, the average number of homes managed by each TMO had never reached 100, and no TMO managed 500 or more. However, the enumeration of TMOs showed that the mean number of homes managed by TMOs changed dramatically in 1990. By 1998 there were roughly equal numbers managing over 500 homes

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and managing fewer than 100; 15 managed more than 1000 homes.

TMO form had inherent and contingent implications for the extent of decentralisation, devolution and participation. The EMB model was intended explicitly to offer less decentralisation and devolution and to require less participation (Bell *et al.*, 1991, p. 7), to be less challenging to local authorities and tenants, and to encourage greater prevalence. Unlike TMCs, EMB boards would contain non-residents and EMBs would not employ staff directly but would use staff seconded from the local authority. It was also widely assumed that EMBs would cover larger areas, take on fewer powers and less direct control of budgets (for example, Zipfel, 1987). Where small TMCs with their own staff remained anomalies, EMBs would fit more closely with existing or developing local authority decentralisation initiatives and could take on an existing decentralised area. The growth in average size was largely but not entirely due to the development of EMBs, intended explicitly for large estates (Zipfel, 1987). Eight well-publicised pilot EMBs which began operation in 1990 and 1991 managed on average over 1000 homes (Bell *et al*., 1991). However, TMOs continued to offer extreme decentralisation compared to local authority initiatives, despite the rapid growth in average size from 1990.

TMOs in local authority housing offered extreme levels of devolution as well as decentralisation compared with those of direct local authority management, because of the number and significance of powers transferred under management agreements. All 16 cases took on responsibility for ordering and monitoring day-to-day repairs, tenancy management, management of empty homes and some monitoring caretaking, cleaning, grounds maintenance, concièrges and street sweeping, where provided. All 5 TMCs and the 1 EMB established after the 'Right to Manage' employed and managed their own staff. An additional EMB employed some staff to supplement local authority staff. Most cases administered housing allocations. The majority also had the discretion to make internal transfers without seeking local authority approval and nearly half had their own allocation policy. All but 2 cases had responsibility for rent collection, rent account monitoring and arrears collection. On average, TMCs took on 9 powers from those listed above and EMBs took on 5.

Table 4 compares the powers taken on by the TMOs with those of decentralised structures within direct local authority management. Almost every power was delegated to a greater proportion of TMOs than decentralised structures within local authorities, and the typical TMO had more powers than the typical decentralised structure. For example, no directly managed decentralised units employed their own staff, had their own bank accounts, set their own service charges or used special tenancy agreements. Even the administration of transfers was fully or partly decentralised in only 21 per cent of local authorities in 1986/87 (CHR, 1989, p. 150).

The main exception was over contracts for manual work. In 1990/91, 91 per cent of local authorities used a direct labour organisation (DLO) to carry out some repair work and DLOs performed 67 per cent of all repairs (Bines *et al*., 1993, pp. 124–125). Figures are likely to have fallen somewhat over the 1990s. TMOs did not differ significantly from this pattern.

The enumeration showed that local authorities with TMOs tended to have high levels of deprivation, large housing stocks, poor housing management performance, receipt of Estate Action funding and Labour party control, and were concentrated in London and the North West. This meant that a slightly different picture emerged if cases were compared with the local authorities in which they were located rather than with nation-wide survey data. More than half the cases started development in local authorities that already had some decentralised management and 11 had more than 5000 council homes in 1994 and so were also affected by compulsory competitive tendering of housing management services, which effectively encouraged further devolution. This meant that, for half the cases, nearby directly managed or con-

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Table 4. Powers taken on by TMOs compared with those of decentralised units within direct local authority management (percentages)

	Staff employment	Role in staff selection	Own bank account	Service charge setting	Arrears recovery	Repairs reporting	Repairs monitoring	Cyclical works	Own tenancy agreement	Allocations administration	Allocations policy	Caretaker management	Tenant consultation
TMO case studies[a]	50	100	50	6	88	100	100	—	6	63	44	6	100
Decentralised housing management in 20 local authority estates, 1994 (Power and Tunstall, 1995)	0	36	0	0	90	—	—	75[c]	0	45	—	30	95
Decentralised housing management in 20 local authority estates, 1982 (Power and Tunstall, 1995)	0	—	0	0	95	—	—	35[c]	0	45	—	15	75
Partly or fully decentralised in local authorities nation-wide, 1986/87 (CHR, 1989)	0	—	0	0	35	44	32[b]	10[c]	0	22	5	—	37
Fully decentralised in local authorities nation-wide 1986/87 (CHR, 1989)	0	0	0	0	18	21	15[b]	0[c]	0	6	0	—	12
Partly or fully decentralised in local authorities nation-wide 1990/91 (Bines *et al.*, 1993)	—	—	32[d]	—	45	54	—	—	—	16	—	—	—
Fully decentralised in local authorities nation-wide 1990/91 (Bines *et al.*, 1993)	—	—	0	—	5	33	—	—	—	5	—	—	—

[a] The mean date for start of operation was 1991.
[b] Post-inspection.
[c] Planning the capital programme.
[d] At least some devolved budgets.
Sources: Interviews; Power and Tunstall (1995, p. 41); CHR (1989, p. 150); Bines *et al.* (1993).

tracted-out decentralised offices had similar or identical powers to the TMO by the time of interview. In 4 cases, they actually had slightly more powers.

Distinguishing devolution from greater resources. It has been argued that devolution is usually accompanied by, or in practice consists of, more intensive resourcing than the *status quo* (Glennerster and Turner, 1993). It is important to separate the effects of devolution *per se* from any resourcing changes.

As other contemporary studies have found, it was difficult to get accurate and complete information on allowances paid by local authorities to TMOs to carry out their responsibilities, or on spending for the areas prior to TMO operation (see, for example, Price Waterhouse, 1995; CURS/Arthur Andersen, 1999). Allowances ranged from £209 to £1279 per home per year. Most interviewees thought that the TMOs were better resourced than other areas. However, three cases had been subject to detailed research by external auditors. In one, costs were lower than a comparator estate that appeared to be roughly as difficult to manage (Price Waterhouse, 1995, p. 59), in a second they were higher and, in a third, Arthur Andersen found that they were lower than direct neighbourhood management. In addition, all cases were responsible for homes that were inherently more costly to manage than average by at least one measure (Balkman *et al*., 1992). There was some evidence that TMOs' budgetary position relative to other estates in the local authority had improved in the context of cuts elsewhere, which may have influenced interviewees' perceptions.

Staffing levels provide further evidence on resourcing. The cases with similar powers to those of directly managed decentralised offices had only 107 homes per staff member at the time of interview. CHR found 381 homes/staff member in area offices in local authorities with 10 000–20 000 homes, 251 in local authorities with 20 000–30 000 homes and 353 for local authorities with over 30 000 homes in 1986 (CHR, 1989, p. 16). Bines *et al*. found a mean of 397 homes per staff member in 'estate offices' and 237 in 'neighbourhood' offices in 1991/92 (Bines *et al*., 1993, p. 175).

However, the offices examined in both these studies tended to have fewer powers than TMOs and may have been serviced by additional manual staff. The figures for management staff only in TMOs were similar to those found in 7 local authorities in 1991 by Balkman *et al*. (1992, p. 12). Average 'patch' sizes in 20 estates with early decentralised management, with similar powers to those of TMOs, stood at 386 homes in 1994 (Power and Tunstall, 1995, p. 43). Overall, the evidence seems to suggest somewhat greater staffing intensity in TMOs compared with non-devolved management, but this could indicate different use of resources rather than more resources.

4.2 Formal Levels of Participation

This section assesses the nature and extent of participation through TMOs in comparison with the local authority *status quo*, by considering the formal role of tenants in the decision-making procedures.

Between 66 per cent and 100 per cent of places on the board were reserved for residents, with councillors and, in one case, staff making up the remainder. Tenant majorities meant that, formally, TMOs offered extreme levels of public participation, compared with local authorities overall and with other participation structures within them (see Bines *et al*., 1993; Cairncross *et al*., 1997). Formal decision-making in TMOs took place through the TMO board.

5. Beyond 'Procedural' Measures: How Formal Devolution and Participation Worked in Practice

5.1 How Devolution Worked in Practice

This section examines how devolution worked in practice by using qualitative and quantitative evidence from interviews, triangulated between respondents, to investigate how far formal devolution of powers and

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responsibilities through the management agreement was implemented in practice, to what extent powers over staffing—the most significant element of budgets—were implemented to produce changes from the *status quo*, and what changes there were in management policy and practice.

Implementation of the management agreement. Qualitative evidence showed that in practice no management agreement was fully implemented. Despite the extent of formal devolution through management agreements, local authorities sustained substantial power over TMO operation.

The majority of agreements were seen by interviewees as inherently difficult to implement, with omissions, inaccuracies and lack of clarity on divisions of responsibility and on sanctions, including financial penalties and the use of arbitration. One resident said: "the [meaning of the agreement] is being renegotiated constantly". Agreements included TMO responsibilities as well as powers and it was not always in TMOs' interests to implement all parts fully. However, limited or partial implementation appeared to be largely explained by local authority resistance or indifference. For example, one TMO had not been given access to rent accounts despite having responsibility for collecting rent and arrears. Another local authority failed for 10 months to provide the information on repair performance specified in the agreement. Another was planning to amalgamate the TMO's office and staff with a non-TMO neighbourhood, although the office and staffing arrangements were set out in the agreement. In some cases, implementation decayed over time due to local authority pressure and decline in active participation.

Most resident board members had not understood the potential of the formal devolution and participation, despite training in the development process. After devolution, local authorities took on a new role in supporting and monitoring the TMOs. In most cases, one unit was charged with support and monitoring, despite the tension between roles. However, after the intensive support in the development period most TMOs felt "left to sink or swim", as a manager said. Ironically, the TMOs with fewer powers appeared to have greater problems in implementing agreements.

Changes in staffing. Staffing structure and posts were largely based on local authority patterns, even where TMOs took on responsibility for employment. Five cases supplemented repairs contracts with directly employed 'handy people', a locally based and flexible role, outside DLO demarcation and control. Bines *et al*. found that in 1990/91 only 6 per cent of DLOs were fully decentralised and fewer than half local authorities employed caretakers who also did any minor repairs (Bines *et al*., 1993, p. 123–125). Compulsory competitive tendering for manual DLOs in the 1980s meant that many area-based teams were disbanded or spread over larger contract areas (Power and Tunstall, 1995). As a tenant participation officer commented, "unless there is some sort of corporate shift, there won't be an estate-based repairs service without a TMO". There were other more minor innovations such as the introduction of surveyors or environmental supervisors to improve ordering and monitoring of repairs and other services.

Changes in policy and practice. The DoE did not envisage transfer of powers for policy-making and management agreements did not explicitly delegate them (Table 4). Most policies remained similar to those before the TMO and used elsewhere in the local authority.

Nevertheless, most cases made some changes. Nearly half aimed to build a surplus on the management and maintenance account. Most resident board members felt expenditure was too high generally or wanted security or funding for planned maintenance. While planned rather than reactive maintenance is widely seen as good practice, many local authorities effectively ceased this work in the late 1980s or early 1990s (Power and Tunstall, 1995). Some cases established me-

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dium-term plans for taking on additional powers or directly employed staff. Most dramatically, three were exploring stock transfer at the time of interview, one well ahead of thinking in the local authority. Interviewees in two cases with their own allocation policy suggested the TMO might be more selective: a resident said, "you're never going to want the riff-raff, if we get one or two bad apples it could ruin the mix". Three cases appeared to be tougher on tenancy enforcement than the local authority. There were more changes in policy and practice in cases that took on more powers and in TMCs.

Management practice also changed through devolution. Decentralisation made monitoring of contracts, whether new or inherited, easier for staff and residents. A resident commented, "before, managers would never have known if a light fitting had been changed in one of five thousand homes".

Because of decentralisation and the addition of new estate-based manual workers, staff spent much more time on the estate; they were identifiable and so easier for tenants to reach and to hold to account. A manager said, "it's a completely different way of doing things than the bunker mentality". In most cases, staff–resident relations both improved and became more informal. For example, in one case relations initially worsened, but then improved significantly. A resident said, "now they know they are being listened to … tenants don't shout any more".

The most distinctive practice was found in the small TMCs. This appeared to be due to older management agreements that preserved past local authority practice, the looseness of the agreements, the lack of local authority monitoring and support, and greater hands-on involvement by residents. A tenant participation officer, concerned about the confidentiality of tenancy files, said that one had a "1970s co-op feel … a lot of things that we're not comfortable with now".

5.2 How Participation Worked in Practice

The extent of participation in practice was investigated through triangulating interviewees' views on residents' activity and influence in TMO operation, through the proportion of residents involved formally and informally, the proportion of work done by residents and the roles played by residents. Table 5 gives evidence of the involvement of the main body of residents in the activities of the TMO board through three simple measures. Proportions are given out of the number of tenancies rather than residents.

The level of awareness, only arguably a form of 'participation' (Arnstein, 1969) but a necessary precursor to other forms, was low in several cases. A majority of residents must have had at least some awareness of the TMO during the original ballots, but this appeared to have been eroded through time and turnover. Attendance at annual general meetings was mostly low and it appeared that most who attended were board members. This implies that many TMOs were in a similar position to other participatory organisations that do not have any formal powers, such as many tenants' associations.

The first resident board members were elected during the TMO development process. They were usually drawn from a core active group, in itself usually based on a pre-existing tenants' organisation. Subsequent elections to the board were often unopposed and turnover was low. For example, one chair had been a board member for 14 years and chair for 10 years. The number of resident board places was in most cases only a few per cent of tenancies.

Again, the small TMCs were distinctive. There appeared to be a relationship between decentralisation and the extent of participation in practice. In a smaller area and smaller group of residents, it would be more difficult not to be aware of the TMO office and TMO board members, and information could reach greater proportions of the whole population through word of mouth.

The relative quantitative contribution residents made to the work of the TMO was assessed through comparison between estimated staff hours, based on staffing numbers, and estimated resident time contributions

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Table 5. The proportion of residents participating in the activities of the TMO (absolute numbers as a percentage of tenancies)

Case	Formal participation (places for residents on the board)	Other measures	
		Recent annual general meeting attendance	Estimate of proportion of residents aware of TMO at time of interview
1	7	43	All
2	18	22[a]	All
3	NA	NA	All
4	9	NA	Majority
5	1	7	Half
6	19	48[b]	All
7	2	4	Half
8	3	NA	NA
9	3	NA	Majority
10	1	1	Majority
11	NA	NA	NA
12	NA	2	Minority
13	2	NA	NA
14	3	1	Minority
15	1	17[c]	Minority
16	1	30[c]	Minority

[a] Two per year.
[b] Four per year.
[c] Had ever attended a meeting (Price Waterhouse, 1995).
Source: Interviews and reports.

based on the number of meetings, meetings attendance and, where known, the time contribution of board members outside meetings.

Relative contributions from residents varied widely, from 20 per cent to 1 per cent of staff time. Residents' contributions appeared to vary by TMO size to some extent, so that in some small cases volunteer time meant a gross increase in effective staffing of 20 per cent. However, in one larger TMO, residents monitored repairs weekly and met DLO managers fortnightly, and a senior officer commented

> I don't think other area offices have the time to go through the detail the EMB go through … the DLO have been pulled up by their bootstraps.

The roles played by TMO resident board members appeared in most cases to be qualitatively different from those of activists in other forms of tenant participation (Cairncross *et al.*, 1997), particularly where TMOs employed staff. The powers taken on also conferred distinctively significant and formalised responsibility. A councillor argued that in traditional tenant participation

> You can go … you can have your moan, and you can go home … fundamentally different from meeting together and saying 'On our estate we have got £40 000 to spend, shall we spend it on doing up the roads or should we bring forward the external painting?'.

The relationship between devolution and participation. Evidence from the TMOs supported the view that high levels of participation depended on high levels of decentralisation. The proportion of residents involved in TMO development and operation, the proportion of work done by residents in TMO operation and residents' roles

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in TMO operation were associated with smaller TMO size.

The effect of the combination of devolution and participation on staff management and performance monitoring. While some staff were very positive about working with a TMO from the beginning, many were affected by fear and ignorance. In three cases, it had been difficult to recruit staff to work in the TMO. In several, staff–resident board member relations had actually worsened over the initial months. A resident said

> When we first went live, it was chaos for two months. People were in there banging the counter.

However, in all cases there were significant improvements in relations over the first one or two years, as staff and residents built up experience of the new ways of working.

Relationships between staff and board were mostly conducted through TMO chairs, secretaries and treasurers, outside formal board meetings. This evolved naturally, but functioned to limit potential for different instructions coming from different board members and to limit involvement by residents in day-to-day management. It also demonstrated the limits of researching participation through formal arrangements. Significantly, most interviewees felt that the divisions of responsibility between staff and board members had not been made clear in the development process, were not clear in peoples' minds even after some experience of operation and fluctuated over time.

Directly employed staff were particularly affected by the changes. One said, "TMOs are rubbish at managing staff". All felt less secure. Another said, "Everyone feels like [they're] on a knife edge … TMOs have managed to constructively dismiss lead officers". In contrast, some seconded staff felt they were supervised and directed both by the local authorities and by residents, which raised the issue of what a resident called "divided loyalties".

Most TMO staff found that they had more autonomy and greater room for discretion than they would have had as direct local authority employees, because of the continuing role for interpreting the management agreement and the staff–board relationship, but also because of a reduction in local authority supervision and support which was really compensated for by residents. In most cases, staff and residents felt that they had been left by the local authority to "sink or swim", and even seconded staff said that "the traditional lines of management within the department don't exist". TMOs did not fit within existing monitoring arrangements and local authority tenant participation departments were often overwhelmed. A senior officer admitted, "It's not really clear who is responsible for monitoring TMOs—it's messy".

In addition, the lead officer role in some cases attracted what a tenant participation officer called "maverick figures". In these circumstances, a councillor noted, "if you've got a bad person [as TMO manager] it can make corruption a little more likely to flourish".

6. The Effects of Devolution and Participation

6.1 The Effects of Devolution and Participation on Processes

Table 6 summarises all the qualitative evidence collected of changes in processes that had the potential to affect housing management outcomes. It attempts to identify which could be achieved through devolution and participation separately and which through the combination.

Some of these changes could potentially be achieved through initiatives other than the development and operation of TMOs, but most appear to be distinctively associated with the TMO model. This table does not measure the strength of each process, but potential changes to increase effectiveness outnumber those that might reduce it, and devolution and participation appear to be most important in combination.

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Table 6. Processes through which devolution and participation, separately and combined, through TMOs might influence outcomes, derived from the case studies

	Potential sources of increased effectiveness	Potential sources of reduced effectiveness
Devolution only	Decentralisation of staff Devolution of decision-making and budgets Improved pay and conditions for staff New staff New types of staff Changed staff culture New or renegotiated contracts for estate services Changes in policy and practice	Worsened provision of services by the local authority Reduced ability to affect policy and practice centrally
Devolution and participation	Decentralisation of staff Devolution of decision-making and budgets Improved pay and conditions for staff New staff New types of staff Changed staff culture New or renegotiated contracts for estate services Changes in policy and practice Greater autonomy for staff Increased job satisfaction and motivation for staff Improved staff–resident-representative relations Improved staff–resident relations Staff supplemented by voluntary labour of residents Improved monitoring of contracts for estate services Improved information for staff from residents Increased peer pressure on residents	Worsened provision of services by the local authority Reduced ability to affect policy and practice centrally Staff recruitment problems Lack of support and direction for staff Lack of strategy Increased staff insecurity Worsened or changed pay and conditions Worsened staff–tenant-representative relations Reduced monitoring of performance More variety in practice and performance
Participation only	Increased job satisfaction and motivation for staff Improved staff–resident-representative relations Improved staff–resident relations Staff supplemented by voluntary labour of residents Improved monitoring of contracts for estate services Improved information for staff from residents Increased peer pressure on residents	Staff recruitment problems Worsened staff–tenant-representative relations More variety in practice and performance

Source: Interviews.

6.2 The Effects of Devolution and Participation on Outcomes

Service provision outcomes. This section considers effects on management performance, that affected all residents and the devolving authority. In the vast majority of cases, TMOs were associated with improved housing management performance compared to the situation before the TMO according to

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at least one of the following indicators which are widely used in studies of housing management performance (CHR, 1989; Bines *et al*., 1993; Audit Commission, 1998)

(1) proportion of homes empty;
(2) level of rent arrears;
(3) speed and quality of repairs; and
(4) quality of cleaning and caretaking.

The first two were assessed through quantitative data and the last two through interviewees' views, both on change since before the TMO had been in operation.

On average, there was improvement on two indicators. In the vast majority of cases, TMOs were performing above the local authority average on at least one indicator. Again, on average, TMO performance was above the local authority average on two indicators.

The indicator which improved for the greatest number of TMOs was repairs, which is usually the most important area for tenant satisfaction and complaints (Karn *et al*., 1997). The 'handy people' employed by some cases made a major contribution to the improved speed of service and the cost of routine repairs, and also made a big impact on residents' perceptions of the service, according to managers. For example one said "[The handy person] is definitely our most popular member of staff". This appears to have been directly related to the devolution and participation in employment. The indicator on which TMOs were most likely to have performance above the local authority average was the proportion of homes empty.

Writers on housing management have recognised the impact that 'difficulty of management' can have on outcomes (Balkman *et al*., 1992; CURS/Arthur Andersen, 1999), but not that poor performance may increase the 'ease of improvement'. In many cases, past management performance had been very poor. Most cases managed housing that had been among the least popular in the local authority under direct local authority management, with up to 20 per cent of homes empty. All studied local authorities had rent arrears above the national median and more than half of the TMOs had even higher arrears than their local authority did before TMO operation. One manager noted that improvement would slow down as the "easiest part [of changes]" had been completed.

The effectiveness of most TMOs was limited by weaknesses in the local authorities' performance of retained functions. There were particular problems with allocations, the administration of housing benefit and rent accounts or computing. This implies that greater effects might have been achieved if there had been greater devolution.

Quantitative data were supported by the summarising assessments of interviewees. The vast majority of the main achievements of the TMOs identified by residents were management-related. A manager said

> Even if there are still difficulties, [residents] … have done better than the local authority would have.

Another officer said that, although improvement was marginal and performance was still below average on all measures, the TMO may have prevented decline. The existence and value of 'intangibles' in housing management has been recognised by many studies (for example, Price Waterhouse, 1995; CURS/Arthur Andersen, 1999). Some interviewees felt that TMOs had additional effects on the quality of management, through changes in management practice, changed staff–tenant relationships, changed staff attitudes, improved repairs and visible improvements in estates services described above, and some felt that these effects were more significant than quantitative changes.

Outcomes for active participants. In most cases, a group of 1–5 residents, who had often been members of an earlier tenants' group, had changed significantly through development and operation. For example, in one case, all 10 board members felt that they had personally benefited from involvement. A senior officer felt that 5 board members had "really developed" and the chair had gone from "being a nobody to somebody who has got an opinion, a valued opinion".

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The secretary had got a part-time job, and another resident had become a councillor. In two other cases, board members got jobs they would not otherwise have got, through experience gained and increased awareness of job opportunities.

However, the effects of empowerment appeared to be ambiguous. Many residents faced a heavy voluntary workload. They might be exposed to unwanted or excessive responsibility, to challenges to their representativeness or legitimacy, or to temptations to or allegations of corruption. Many residents found it difficult to reduce their roles because of lack of suitable replacements. These processes could have ambiguous effects, they could not be stopped or reversed and residents could not have predicted or explicitly chosen them. All residents interviewed enjoyed at least some aspect of their involvement; these processes mean it cannot be assumed that benefits to resident board members always outweighed costs. The prevalence and extent of these impacts on active residents appeared to outweigh those found in available evidence on most other forms of tenant participation (see Cairncross *et al*., 1997).

Outcomes for the devolving organisation. A minority of TMOs acted as a model or catalyst for strategic change across the department. A councillor said

> [This] was one of the most archaic housing departments in the country, stuck in the 1950s. Decentralisation and the EMB have revolutionised it.

However, the most common effect was changes in policy and practice on tenant participation. Despite the widespread rhetorical support for tenant participation, most councillors and officers admitted to some negative attitudes towards TMOs at the start of development. This changed as TMOs began operating, and could have effects for other local authority tenants and estates. For example, one tenant participation officer felt that the TMO had "been a model for the rest of the department". There was one counter-example where officers felt that the existence of TMOs allowed the council to "rest on its [tenant participation] laurels". TMOs also affected other areas of housing policy and practice across housing departments. Examples quoted included increased flexibility, a more 'populist' approach to anti-social behaviour, improved monitoring and better service from the DLO. However, these effects were limited through the lack of awareness by local authority staff not directly involved with the TMOs.

These examples provide some evidence for the sum-game power model that devolution of power through TMOs was not necessarily matched by an equal and opposite loss from councils. However, there was some evidence that devolution to several TMOs had a cumulative effect beyond powers transferred in individual management agreements and reduced local authorities' 'strategic' powers. In one authority, officers began to feel that TMOs created cost and risk and reduced choice in 'packaging' areas and budgets for CCT and for transfer to housing associations. In another authority, the tenant participation officer felt that councillors "would be concerned about democratic accountability" if the proportion of homes managed by TMOs rose above a certain level.

Exploring differences in outcomes between cases. There was considerable diversity amongst the cases in management outcomes. Were these associated with differences in the extent of devolution and participation?

The extent of management performance improvement was associated with EMB form. Higher absolute performance levels were associated with smaller size, greater powers and TMC form, but not with the extent of improvement. This suggests that formal characteristics, the level of decentralisation, devolution and formal participation, were important to differences between cases and thus could be argued to have an independent effect on outcomes.

However, at least some of this effect could be explained by context. Table 7 indicates a

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Table 7. Contextual factors in addition to devolution and participation that appeared to affect TMO processes and outcomes

Management performance pre-TMO
Management difficulty
Effectiveness of resident training pre-operation
Nature of resident population
Extent of peer pressure and community feeling acting on residents, levels of neighbourliness
Staff and councillor awareness, attitudes and involvement
Effectiveness of local authority in carrying out its responsibilities under the management agreement
Number of existing TMOs in the local authority
Degree of communication within the local authority
The level of other housing initiatives in the local authority
Capital funding
Local supply and demand for housing
Publicity for the TMO

wide range of contextual factors which qualitative evidence associated with TMO processes and outcomes. EMBs, larger TMOs and those which took on fewer powers tended to take on homes that were more difficult to manage. This suggests that contextual factors set significant and potentially predictable limits to their impact overall.

7. Conclusion

This study has developed existing information on devolution and participation in public services with a detailed contemporary example from council housing. In formal terms, TMOs offered extreme decentralisation, devolution and participation compared to the *status quo* of mainstream local authority provision. However, the article proposed and implemented measures of the level of devolution and participation beyond procedural ones.

The implementation of the agreements for devolution were complicated, negotiated and diverse processes. Not all formal transfers of power were implemented in practice. There were considerable differences between cases. Formal levels of participation appeared to be less important than the way that participation operated in practice. Overall, informal relations between the devolving authority, the staff and the resident participants appeared to be highly significant and likely to affect processes and outcomes. This confirmed the distinction between formal procedures and structures for devolution and participation, and practice. It confirmed the importance of processes and demonstrated the value of detailed and qualitative evidence for the identification of devolution and participation effects.

TMOs were distinctive because of the combination of devolution with participation, which was crucial to changes in processes and to the significant outcomes for service, participants and devolving organisations. Devolution and participation separately appeared to lead to many similar processes. However, in combination, these changes in processes were magnified, particularly through the devolution of responsibility for staffing and the lack of clarity over role in monitoring, policy and practice.

The significance of informal relations between active residents and staff and between the TMO and the local authority provided potential for greater efficiency and responsiveness, but also for inefficiency, conflict and corruption. Devolution and participation appeared to demand special contributions from staff and participants, and a special combination of flexibility and support from devolving organisations. This must be reconsidered if devolution and participation are to become more prevalent, particularly within increasingly performance-oriented public

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service working to centrally determined targets.

The evidence that devolution may be associated with more active participation confirmed widespread assumptions in the literature. However, the evidence that participation may be dependent on devolution for many of its effects is significant, particularly as many past and present efforts to use participation to improve public services have not been accompanied by formal or 'real' devolution.

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